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## XVIII.—SUICIDE IN THE PLAYS OF SHAKESPEARE

In an essay on Sophocles and Shakespeare,<sup>1</sup> the late Professor John Churton Collins makes, about the latter's use of the motive of suicide, some striking remarks which have hitherto, I believe, been allowed to pass unchallenged. The attitude of the two dramatists toward the crime is, he says, exactly similar:

"By neither of them has any glamor of sentiment been cast over it. In no case is it associated with honor, but in all cases with intemperance or ignominy, or with both. . . . In the suicide of Ajax, the one instance in which Sophocles has represented suicide as a deliberate act, what impresses us throughout is the utter demoralization of the victim. . . . Labouring at first in a turbid storm of frenzy, he regains self-mastery only to reduce to the dominion of a perverted will an anarchy of conflicting emotions—rage, shame, remorse, pity, grief—perishing desperately, a laughing stock to his foes, a source of sorrow and reproach to his friends. So perish Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet, Brutus, Cassius, Titinius, Cleopatra, Antony, Enobarbus, Goneril, Othello, and, it would seem, Lady Macbeth. In none of these cases is self-destruction associated with anything but intemperance or retribution. 'The foul'st best fits my latter part of life,' exclaims Enobarbus; and it is remarkable that the poet should have put into the mouth of Brutus, the noblest of those who fall by their own hands in the tragedies, not merely a condemnation of the act generally, but a condemnation of the one suicide which tradition has universally glorified, and which even Dante appears to have excepted from the catalogue of crimes:

I did blame Cato for the death  
Which he did give himself; I know not how,  
But I do find it cowardly and vile,  
For fear of what might fall, so to prevent  
The time of life: arming myself with patience

<sup>1</sup> *Studies in Shakespeare*, London, 1904, pp. 162 ff.

To stay the providence of some high powers  
That govern us below.<sup>1</sup>

Hamlet's remark in his famous soliloquy will occur to every one, but still more striking are the words in which Gloucester expresses his thankfulness that he has been saved from such a crime:

You ever-gentle gods, take my breath from me;  
Let not my worser spirit tempt me again  
To die before you please."<sup>2</sup>

If these remarks are just, Shakespeare must be credited with a definite theory of suicide. He must be believed to have made up his mind about its moral quality and to have deliberately expressed his condemnation of the act, not merely through the mouths of his characters, but by representing it in his plays as essentially ignoble, the result of weakness or depravity. Thus the self-destruction of Brutus must be regarded as a manifestation of the weaker element in his character; that of Antony as a last illustration of the demoralizing influence of Egypt upon his nature; and the death of Romeo and of Juliet as a brand of disgrace set by the dramatist upon the madness and unrestraint of their passion.

I cannot believe this to be a true description of Shakespeare's attitude, nor do I find that the evidence of the plays in any way bears it out. In the first place, Mr. Collins seems to me entirely to mistake the significance of the specific passages which he has quoted, in assuming them to be the expression of a personal conviction on the part of their author. The words of Enobarbus, which

<sup>1</sup> *Julius Cæsar*, v, i, 101-8.

<sup>2</sup> *King Lear*, iv, vi, 221-3. Collins refers also to the similar remarks of Imogen, *Cymbeline*, III, iv, 80-2; and Gratiano, *Othello*, v, ii, 204 ff. Cf. also the conventional phrases regarding suicide in *Hamlet*, v, i, 242 and v, i, 1.

have been plucked ruthlessly from their context, may be dismissed at once. They should be read in connection with what precedes:

This blows my heart.

If swift thought break it not, a swifter mean  
Shall outstrike thought; but thought will do't, I feel.  
I fight against thee! No! I will go seek  
Some ditch wherein to die; the foul'st best fits  
My latter, part of life.<sup>1</sup>

The "swifter mean," of course, is suicide, which is to be used only in case natural causes fail to result in death. "The foul'st" obviously refers not to suicide but to "some ditch," a place appropriate to the disgraceful character of his latter days.

The remarks of Hamlet and Gloucester and the fine lines<sup>2</sup> in which Imogen rejects the temptation to end her own life, together with several other passages in the plays, do indeed voice the traditional Christian horror of a deed which religion has set down as a mortal sin, in some respects the most dreadful of all sins, since it admits of no repentance. The canon set by the Almighty against self-slaughter, the "prohibition so divine that cravens my weak hand," has ever been a powerful deterrent motive to those in whose lives religion is a vital force. Shakespeare knew this well, and his dramatic instinct bade him attribute these dominant sentiments to the greater number of his Christian characters. But other points of view are presented with equal force. In some instances the restraining motive is not piety but selfishness or base fear. Thus Macbeth's hand is stayed

<sup>1</sup> *Antony and Cleopatra*, IV, vi, 34 ff.

<sup>2</sup> *Cymbeline*, III, iv, 80-82.

by lack of nerve, coupled with a fierce desire to shed the blood of his foes:

Why should I play the Roman fool, and die  
On mine own sword? Whiles I see lives, the gashes  
Do better upon them.<sup>1</sup>

And Iago dissuades Roderigo by a cynical appeal to the most selfish motives:

If thou wilt needs damn thyself, do it a more delicate way than drowning. . . . Seek thou rather to be hanged in compassing thy joy than to be drown'd and go without her.<sup>2</sup>

At the scene of the burial of Ophelia the sympathies of the audience are enlisted against the bigoted priest who represents the stern attitude of the church toward one who is believed to have taken her own life. It is not merely Laertes's feelings but ours as well which are expressed in the words

Lay her i' the earth,  
And from her fair and unpolluted flesh  
May violets spring! I tell thee, churlish priest,  
A minist'ring angel shall my sister be,  
When thou liest howling.<sup>3</sup>

If one is to take Shakespeare's utterances concerning suicide, irrespective of character and situation, as indicative of his personal attitude, it is as easy to show that he advocated suicide as that he condemned it. "It is silliness to live," says Roderigo, "when to live is a torment; and then have we a prescription to die, when death is our physician." In the Roman plays generally, suicide is seldom mentioned but with respect, often, as we shall see, with enthusiasm.

<sup>1</sup> *Macbeth*, v, viii, 1 ff.

<sup>2</sup> *Othello*, i, iii, 359 ff.

<sup>3</sup> *Hamlet*, v, ii, 262 ff.

Then is it sin  
 To rush into the secret house of death,  
 Ere death dare come to us?

. . . . .  
 It is great  
 To do the thing that ends all other deeds;  
 Which shackles accidents and bolts up change.<sup>1</sup>

Obviously such passages as these prove nothing as to Shakespeare's personal attitude toward suicide, but neither do the words of Imogen or Hamlet or Gloucester.<sup>2</sup>

The case of Brutus, to which Mr. Collins attaches so much importance, is a compelling instance of the truth that Shakespeare was thinking nothing of the opinion for itself and everything of its appropriateness in the mouth of him who utters it. In the first place, the fact that the speech quoted by Mr. Collins has its original in Plutarch<sup>3</sup> is sufficient to warn us against finding it in

<sup>1</sup> *Antony and Cleopatra*, IV, xv, 80-82; V, ii, 4-6.

<sup>2</sup> Gloucester, it will be remembered, had a special reason to assent to the popular superstition that suicide was the direct temptation of one's evil angel or of the foul fiend himself. It is only after Edgar's description of the fearful being whom he pretends to have seen that Gloucester ceases to regret his failure to destroy himself.

<sup>3</sup> *Shakespeare's Plutarch*, edited by the Reverend Walter W. Skeat, London, 1892, p. 138: "Brutus answered him, being yet but a young man, and not overgreatly experienced in the world: 'I trust (I know not how) a certain rule of philosophy by the which I did greatly blame and reprove Cato for killing of himself, as being no lawful nor godly act touching the gods: nor concerning men, valiant; not to give place and yield to divine providence, and not constantly and patiently to take whatsoever it pleaseth him to send us, but to draw back and fly: but being now in the midst of the danger, I am of a contrary mind. For if it be not the will of God that this battle fall out fortunate for us, I will look no more for hope, neither seek to make any new supply again, but will rid me of this miserable world, and content me with my fortune.'" The language of this passage takes its color from the sentiments of the Christian translators. The first sentence is misinterpreted. What Brutus

any way significant of Shakespeare's personal attitude. But even had the incident been invented by Shakespeare, it would bear no such interpretation as Mr. Collins puts upon it. Brutus has attempted to order his life in accordance with a lofty but cold and abstract moral code. He enters the conspiracy from a sense of duty, against the dictates of his heart; and when he contemplates defeat, he resolves to act not as a Roman but as a philosopher. He will put consistently into practice a rule of conduct previously applied by him in judgment on a deed which his unthinking countrymen have united to praise. But when the test comes and he is face to face with the humiliation of being led in triumph, human nature breaks through the artificial restraint of stoicism and Brutus follows in the steps of Cato.

No, Cassius, no. Think not, thou noble Roman,  
That ever Brutus will go bound to Rome;  
He bears too great a mind.<sup>1</sup>

It is not the weakness of Brutus which speaks here but the strength. His weakness lay rather in the attempt to force upon himself a course of action which would have been contrary to his instinct and to the strongest traditions of his race. In *Julius Cæsar*, as in the Roman plays generally, the characters speak of suicide from the Roman point of view, a point of view which would have been brought home by the narrative of Plutarch even if Shakespeare had not been familiar with it from other sources.

really says is this: "In the younger and less experienced part of my life, I was led, upon philosophical principles, to condemn the conduct of Cato in killing himself, etc."

<sup>1</sup> *Julius Cæsar*, v, i, 111 ff.

But it is not in such detached utterances concerning suicide that Shakespeare's moral attitude toward the crime is to be found. It is rather, if anywhere, in the total impression conveyed by the act itself as represented in the plays. We know that Shakespeare meant the murder of Duncan by Macbeth or the unfilial conduct of Goneril and Regan to be felt as morally execrable, because they are actually and invariably so felt. What feelings, then, do we experience in witnessing or reading the scenes in which the baffled souls of Shakespeare's tragic heroes seek oblivion of their woes in death?

To most readers, certainly, any sense of criminality in the self-murder of Shakespeare's characters is lost in other emotions. The news of the death of Goneril, shut off as she is from all sympathy by the cruelty and baseness of her nature, carries with it a sense of satisfaction that she has paid the penalty for her evil deeds. It makes little difference whether death was inflicted by her own hands or by another's, although it is more appropriate and impressive that she should be driven by the frustration of her plans to execute justice on herself. When, on the other hand, we contemplate the suicide of Romeo, Juliet, Brutus, Othello, Antony, or Cleopatra, our emotion is that of tragic pity. Their errors have been more than expiated by their sufferings; their death is but the culmination of that overplus of evil which rains down upon them in consequence of their faults. So overwhelming at this point in the drama is the mere sense of tragedy that no other feelings, however natural and legitimate under other circumstances, can find a place. What spectator of the final scene of Othello raises for himself the question whether it would not have been nobler for the Moor to control his impulse and live out



the poor remainder of his life in patience? The problem could occur only to the critic, regarding the play coldly from without. Within the theater, if we are moved by the play, we adopt the morals of the dramatist as our own; and here, since this moral issue is not present in the mind of Shakespeare, it is not present in the mind of the audience.

By these considerations we are compelled, I think, to dismiss the idea that Shakespeare strove to arouse by his manner of presenting suicide a sense of moral disapprobation on the part of his audience. Mr. Collins, however, would probably not go so far as to say that Shakespeare set out deliberately to reprobate suicide. Whatever his words may seem to imply, he rests on the simple generalization that suicide is never associated by Shakespeare with magnanimity or honor, always with intemperance or ignominy. But even when taken as a mere statement of fact, can this remark be justified? Is it not rather an instance of what may be termed the pathetic fallacy in Shakespeare criticism, the failure to distinguish between the personal reaction of an individual, which is determined by his prepossessions, and the original intention of the author?

In one sense the suicide of Shakespeare's tragic heroes may perhaps be said to be associated with intemperance or ignominy. Their downfall is the outcome of some flaw or weakness in their natures. Thus the suicide of Romeo may be said to be associated with intemperance, in so far as Romeo's passion was excessive and unrestrained; and, with rather more justice, Antony's suicide may be said to be associated with ignominy, in that Antony's whole Egyptian life was ignominious. But to admit this is by no means to admit that any stigma of

intemperance or ignominy is attached to the manner of their death. The reverse seems rather to be the case. The death of Brutus, Cassius, Antony, Cleopatra and Othello is *immediately* associated with a certain greatness of soul. Thus with Antony and Cleopatra it is the intensity and utter abandon of their passion, the quality that redeems it from unqualified grossness, which at the end is mainly impressed upon us. Their final moments are marked, moreover, by an unmistakable moral elevation. Antony, after sounding the depths of mad fury and degradation, is lifted by the false news of Cleopatra's death into another mood. With the resolution to die he regains his self-possession and his self-esteem. Suicide does not present itself to his mind as a temptation, but as the best and worthiest course now open to him, a course which his spirit has thus far been too sluggish to pursue:

Since Cleopatra died,  
I have liv'd in such dishonour, that the gods  
Detest my baseness.  
. . . . .  
Thrice nobler than myself!  
Thou teachest me, O valiant Eros, what  
I should and thou could'st not. My queen and Eros  
Have by their brave instruction got upon me  
A nobleness in record.<sup>1</sup>

When he has wounded himself to death, he shows neither compunction nor regret, but a sense of triumph and exultation:

Peace!  
Not Cæsar's valour hath o'erthrown Antony,  
But Antony's hath triumphed on itself.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Antony and Cleopatra*, IV, xiv, 55-58, 95-98.

<sup>2</sup> *Antony and Cleopatra*, IV, xv, 13-15.

And with his dying breath he gives expression to what is perhaps the first touch of unselfishness in his passion for the queen:

*Ant.* One word, sweet queen:  
Of Cæsar seek your honour with your safety. O!  
*Cleo* They do not go together.  
*Ant.* Gentle, hear me:  
None about Cæsar trust but Proculeius.<sup>1</sup>

Antony succeeds by his death in bringing to complete reconciliation what in his life were constantly and inevitably in conflict, his honor as a Roman and his love for the Egyptian queen.

Cleopatra goes to her death in a mood of more passionate exaltation, appropriate to the greater intensity of her nature. From the moment of Antony's death she determines on suicide.<sup>2</sup> With the certainty that Cæsar will lead her in triumph, all her vacillation ceases; and the final resolve to die brings to her a new sense of steadiness, nobility and strength:

What poor an instrument  
May do a noble deed! He brings me liberty.  
My resolution's plac'd, and I have nothing  
Of woman in me; now from head to foot  
I am marble-constant; now the fleeting moon  
No planet is of mine.<sup>3</sup>

Death itself she greets with words of passionate eloquence:

*Cleo.* Give me my robe, put on my crown; I have  
Immortal longings in me. Now no more  
The juice of Egypt's grape shall moist this lip.  
Yare, yare, good Iras; quick. Methinks I hear

<sup>1</sup> *Ib.*, 45-49.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *iv*, *xv*, 45-50 and 80-82.

<sup>3</sup> *Antony and Cleopatra*, *v*, *ii*, 236 ff.

Antony call; I see him rouse himself  
 To praise my noble act; I hear him mock  
 The luck of Cæsar, which the gods give men  
 To excuse their after wrath. Husband, I come!  
 Now to that name my courage prove my title!  
 I am fire and air; my other elements  
 I give to baser life. So; have you done?  
 Come then, and take the last warmth of my lips.  
 Farewell, kind Charmian; Iras, long farewell.<sup>1</sup>

The *fall* of Antony and Cleopatra is associated with and is the outcome of intemperance and vice; their *death* reveals all that is greatest and intensest in their souls, and so constitutes in a way their justification.

A similar atmosphere invests the suicide of Shakespeare's other Roman characters. We are allowed to forget the meaner side of Cassius's nature as he draws near his doom. The unworthy bickerings between him and Brutus cease, and the two part with lofty expressions of friendship. At the end it is the sight of Titinius captured which moves Cassius to self-destruction:

O, coward that I am, to live so long,  
 To see my best friend ta'en before my face! <sup>2</sup>

Titinius himself dies with the sentiment of friendship uppermost in his mind:

Brutus, come apace,  
 And see how I regarded Caius Cassius.  
 By your leave, gods!—this is a Roman's part.  
 Come Cassius' sword, and find Titinius' heart.<sup>3</sup>

In *Antony and Cleopatra* a similar sentiment of personal devotion prompts Eros and Charmian to follow their master and mistress into the world of shadows.<sup>4</sup> In

<sup>1</sup> *Antony and Cleopatra*, v, ii, 282 ff.

<sup>2</sup> *Julius Caesar*, v, iii, 34-35.

<sup>3</sup> *Ib.*, 87 ff.

<sup>4</sup> *Antony and Cleopatra*, iv, xiv, 89 ff.; v, ii, 317 ff.

these cases Shakespeare associates suicide with the noblest moods of which his characters are capable. Whatever his personal view may have been, he here accepts unquestioningly the traditional Roman admiration of men who, like Cato, Brutus, and Seneca, chose the dignified way of self-inflicted death where meaner spirits would have preferred disgraceful life. This attitude clearly dominates the narrative of Plutarch, from whom Shakespeare derived the general spirit as he did the details of his accounts of the death of the Roman characters. Had he needed a more explicit warrant for his treatment of the death of Antony than was furnished by his own historic and dramatic sense, he might have read it in Plutarch's contrast of the conduct of Antony, who, in spite of the weakness and disgrace attending his last days, "at least effected his death without falling into the enemies' hands," with that of Demetrius, who suffered himself to be taken, "and, with a spirit that was truly bestial, endured an imprisonment of three years for nothing but the low indulgences of appetite."

The completeness with which Shakespeare had assimilated the pagan feeling regarding suicide is witnessed by the tenor of the comments which are made by other characters on the death of his Roman heroes. The note is invariably one of admiration; there is not the slightest trace of the horror which has always colored Christian sentiment toward the deed. Thus *Julius Cæsar* closes with a chorus-like panegyric on the character of Brutus, as witnessed particularly by the manner of his death:

*Messala.*

Strato, where is thy master?

*Strato.*

Free from the bondage you are in, Messala;

The conquerors can but make a fire of him,

For Brutus only overcame himself,

And no man else had honour by his death.

*Lucilius.* So Brutus should be found. I thank thee, Brutus,  
That thou hast proved Lucilius' saying true.<sup>1</sup>

In *Antony and Cleopatra* Decretas speaks of the death of Antony as a manifestation of his nobler Roman qualities.

He is dead, Cæsar;  
Not by a public minister of justice,  
Nor by a hired knife; but that self hand  
Which writ his honour in the acts it did  
Hath, with the courage which the heart did lend it,  
Splitted his heart.<sup>2</sup>

And Cæsar finds the death of Cleopatra not less worthy of herself.

Bravest at the last,  
She levell'd at our purposes, and, being royal,  
Took her own way.<sup>3</sup>

The fact is that Shakespeare has not merely adopted the Roman feeling toward suicide, but has taken occasion to emphasize and heighten it by constant reiteration of such sentiments as these.

When we pass from the atmosphere of *Julius Cæsar* and *Antony and Cleopatra* to that of the Christian plays or of those plays which, if not formally Christian, are yet dominated by Christian rather than pagan sentiment, we shall no longer hear on every side an outspoken glorification of suicide. Noble and pious natures like Imogen and Hamlet will be conscious of the divine command which forbids them to lay violent hands upon what is not theirs to take. The more commonplace character will recoil with a more or less superstitious horror from

<sup>1</sup> *Julius Cæsar*, v, v, 53-59.

<sup>2</sup> *Antony and Cleopatra*, v, i, 19 ff.

<sup>3</sup> *Antony and Cleopatra*, v, ii, 338-40.

the thought of suicide and its consequences to the soul. The rash, the vicious, the desperate, and the base will speak of suicide each in accordance with his own nature. Thus far, then, the plays do but reflect the thought of the men of Shakespeare's time, the attitude expressed, for example in the *Faery Queen*.<sup>1</sup> At the close of the Christian tragedies, however, when the suicide motive comes to take its place in the dramatic catastrophe, Shakespeare allows the traditional feeling to sink into abeyance and calls upon us to accept something very like the Roman point of view.<sup>2</sup> There is at the final moment of the two Christian plays which end in suicide a marked heightening of character, a deliberate emphasizing of the nobler traits of the tragic hero, exactly similar to what I have noted in the cases of Brutus, Cassius, and Antony. In *Romeo and Juliet*, it must be admitted, the dramatist does not entirely lose sight of the Christian attitude toward the deed. Thus Romeo addresses the poison as "desperate pilot,"<sup>3</sup> and the same word is applied by the Friar to Juliet:

And she, too desperate, would not go with me,  
But, as it seems, did violence on herself.<sup>4</sup>

What we are mainly conscious of, however, is not the absence of principle or moral stamina in the lovers, but the intensity and resistlessness of the passion which drives them to their death. The note on which the drama closes is not of reproach but of mingled pity and admiration.

<sup>1</sup> Book I, Canto IX.

<sup>2</sup> The same attitude is suggested at the close of *Hamlet* where Horatio, contemplating suicide, says, "I am more an antique Roman than a Dane."

<sup>3</sup> V, iii, 117.

<sup>4</sup> *Ib.*, 263.

*Montague.* But I can give thee more;  
 For I will raise her statue in pure gold;  
 That whiles Verona by that name be known,  
 There shall no figure at such rate be set  
 As that of true and faithful Juliet.

*Capulet.* As rich shall Romeo's by his lady's lie,  
 Poor sacrifices of our enmity!<sup>1</sup>

In *Othello* a still more frankly pagan attitude toward suicide is demanded of the audience. As the Moor draws near his death, our sense of the fierce brutality of nature which made it possible for him to murder Desdemona grows faint and is all but sunk in pity for the murderer. At first Othello is merely dazed and distracted; then in the face of self-inflicted death he finds a final moment of calm and exaltation. He beholds himself and his past life no longer with the distortion of wrathful frenzy but in the clear light of truth and justice. His dying words associate the suicidal blow with an act of generous and impassioned loyalty in his past life, to which he looks back as an assurance, to himself as well as to the Venetian senate, of the essential nobility of his nature.

I pray you, in your letters,  
 When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,  
 Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate,  
 Nor set down aught in malice. Then must you speak  
 Of one that loved not wisely but too well;  
 Of one not easily jealous, but being wrought  
 Perplex'd in the extreme; of one whose hand  
 Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away  
 Richer than all his tribe; of one whose subdued eyes,  
 Albeit unused to the melting mood,  
 Drop tears as fast as the Arabian trees  
 Their medicinable gum. Set you down this;  
 And say besides, that in Aleppo once  
 Where a malignant and a turban'd Turk

<sup>1</sup> *Ib.*, 298 ff.



Beat a Venetian and traduc'd the state,  
I took by the throat the circumcised dog,  
And smote him, thus.<sup>1</sup>

Cassio, in the lines which follow, gives expression to the feelings of those who have witnessed the tragic scene. His words, it will be noted, express the very sentiment that is so frequently repeated in the Roman plays.

This did I fear, but thought he had no weapon;  
For he was great of heart.<sup>2</sup>

It is needless to enforce the conclusion that Shakespeare's heroes, whether Roman or Christian, inflict death on themselves in a mood of exhilaration, with a strong consciousness of their own courage, and a sense of final triumph over the forces which have baffled and ruined them in life. However much nobler a patient endurance of shame and sorrow may be in reality, the audience is allowed to think of suicide only as the loftier and more worthy way. Anything which would tend to suggest its baser aspect is carefully excluded from the final scenes of the tragedies. The dramatic reason for this is not far to seek. It is essential to the Shakespearean conception of tragedy that a strong impression of the nobleness of the nature which has been brought to ruin should be left upon our minds. Otherwise, as Professor A. C. Bradley, speaking particularly of *Othello*,<sup>3</sup> suggests, the tragic pain of the catastrophe would

<sup>1</sup> *Othello*, v, ii, 340 ff.

<sup>2</sup> *Othello*, v, ii, 360-1. Cf. the expressions used by Cleopatra, and Brutus, above, pp. 384 and 385; and the terms in which Octavius Cæsar speaks of the possible suicide of Cleopatra, *Antony and Cleopatra*, v, ii, 64-5.

<sup>3</sup> *Shakespearean Tragedy*, London, 1904, p. 242.

be intolerable. But the forces of evil do not wholly prevail so long as the tragic heroes are true at the end to the highest that is in them. Brutus and Othello triumph over fate and their own weakness by virtue of what they are. To depict their final act as in itself retributive and ignominious would be to debase the close of the drama and to leave in the hearts of the audience disgust and bitterness. That act of self-destruction, which is demanded by the principles of tragedy not less than by the traditional plot, must rather be magnified to heroic proportion. Rash it may sometimes be, but weak or base it cannot be. It is the last defiance of an unconquerable mind to the decrees of a brutal and resistless fate. If this treatment of suicide seems to the critic to do violence to truth and right morality, the reply of the dramatist is ready at hand. In the Roman plays it is justified by history; and for the others the audience is but asked to exchange for a moment its Christian morality for the more primitive pagan sentiment, a less noble feeling, doubtless, but one which is perfectly intelligible to all men because it is instinctive.

This, then, is the true attitude of Shakespeare toward suicide. It is an attitude which implies no moral theory, which has, in fact, nothing to do with morality, being determined wholly by the laws of art. The number and variety of utterances concerning suicide in the plays do indeed show that Shakespeare must have been keenly alive to the psychological interest of the crime. The subject was akin to that of madness, to which he had obviously given the most curious attention. We may also suppose that the dramatist was interested in the ethical problem of man's right to end his wretchedness or to forestall disgrace by seeking his own death. But what Shake-

speare chiefly saw in this tremendous theme was material for tragedy. In one notable instance, namely, *Othello*, the suicide of the hero is Shakespeare's own modification of the plot. It seems quite possible that he was in other cases influenced in his choice of subject by the presence of suicide as the culmination of a human story. In the work of none of his fellow dramatists does it appear so frequently. Whether he found the motive in his sources or introduced it himself, Shakespeare employed it with the highest theatrical and dramatic effectiveness. His personal feelings regarding suicide we do not know. Presumably they were those of the great majority of his fellow men. Perhaps they were different. At all events we shall search the plays for them in vain.

JAMES HOLLY HANFORD.